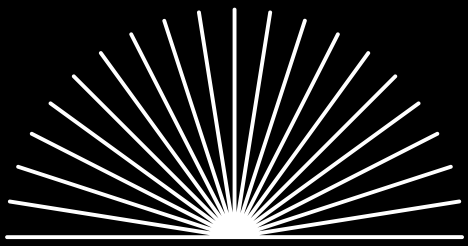
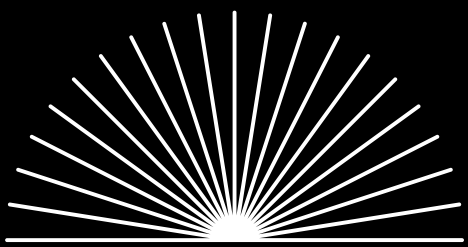
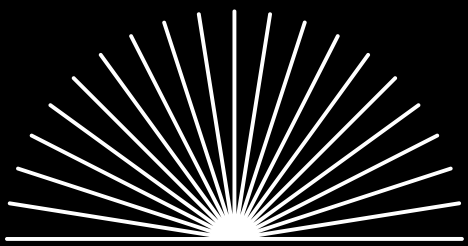
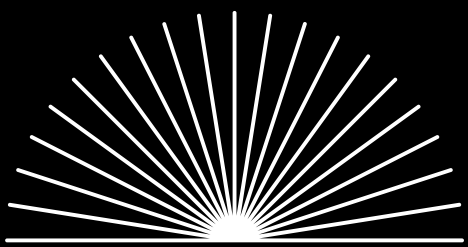


contributive justice @ the public library

thomas alexander



“Do anti-war bibliographies, whole earth how-to lists, community survival information, stoned soul programs. The Good News is Advocacy! Participation! Librarians can generate information. Why watch it congeal on a 3x5 world?”*

— Celeste West, revolting librarian

contributive justice @ the public library

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acts of knowledge creation

Ever have a sneaking suspicion that *something else* might be possible in the library? That so much of what you want to know isn't in a book on the shelf, or in an online course on the library website? That it might be unsaid, hanging there in the air of the library, waiting? Have you ever wanted to turn to the person next to you and tell them about something you learned or experienced and how it *changed* you? Ever wished they would do the same?

This short guide is meant to inspire reflection, conversation, and imagination around ways that libraries can facilitate the *creation* and *use* of local knowledge. It offers ideas, questions, and examples that point to ways in which we might learn with and from one another in the library and then take what we learn out into the world.

The goal of the learning discussed here is change—in our own consciousness, in our lives, and in the life of our communities at large. Some of this is already happening, some of it's been happening for a long time. If you're reading this, you probably want to see more of it. Me too.

This guide is for you, the librarian or the library worker who wants to push the four walls of your library further out into the world.

This guide is also for you, the library patron who wants to bring the world in with you through the front door.

You won’t find anything here that hasn't been said elsewhere. And maybe which couldn’t be said better by you? Read, reflect, share, edit, deface, and copy it. Commit acts of knowledge creation with your friends, then tell others what you did and how you did it, then do it again with them.
Do it in the library. Enlist everyone you can.

motives

I first started thinking about alternate possibilities for public library collections out of a visceral reaction to the current state of digital material lending.

You know this, but it bears repeating: OverDrive and Libby are not your library and they're not your friends. We may love the way they can broadcast eBestsellers to our phones with oh so much *user-friendliness*, but they don't love libraries back. They seek rent from them. Their private-equity-firm-owners and their Big 5 publisher business partners view libraries as big pots of public money from which they can perpetually skim.

And the other thing! These platforms preclude the actual work of actual librarians—the individual connection between librarian and patron, the reciprocal process of learning about one another that leads to meaningful recommendations for the patron and new program ideas for the librarian.

As my resentment of this trend simmered, I started thinking about what it would look like to teach patrons how to find freely available eBooks outside the library's collections—on the Internet Archive's Open Library, for example. Then I read a call to action from information scholar Clara Chu and was struck by a different idea, a no-brainer:

Why not see this trend as an opportunity for counter-programming?

Why not see it as a justification to create books, information, whatever patron's want and need, here in the library?

A quote from Clara Chu in hopes that you may be similarly inspired:

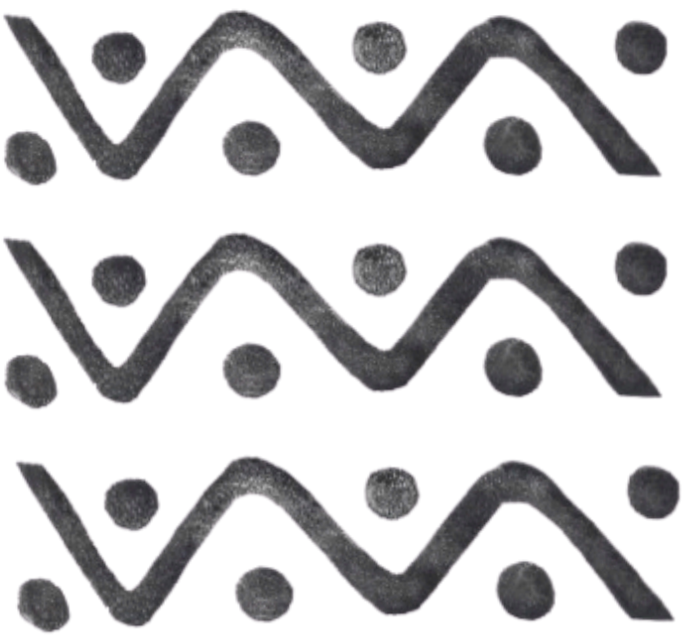
> *"Libraries have more opportunities with information and communication technologies to be a part of efforts where communities can create new information and knowledge that is authentic, where communities have agency in representing themselves, in ensuring that their histories are not forgotten, and that which represents their culture and their heritage is available for future generations to see themselves in and to learn from."*

Some questions to ponder as you read on

What's your motive? What brings you to this work?
Define it. Write about it. Tell someone else about it.
Ask others about theirs. Stoke many fires.

Where do you see your library's resources falling short of meeting people's information needs?
Make a list. Compare lists with a friend. Notice any crossover.

How does your library learn about its patrons' and its community's information needs? How have you made your own information needs known to the library?
Take stock of current practices. Try to spot what's missing.



contributive justice

Before we delve into *how* we can create local knowledge in libraries, let's consider our ethical orientation to this work. We're talking about a specific kind of knowledge. Knowledge from the margins. Histories, testimony, fiction and actionable information by and for people who don't already enjoy the privilege of publication. In other words, we're talking about social justice.

Therefore, the programs we imagine—the houses in which we'll build our community knowledge—must be socially just in their design. There's a lot to consider when designing a socially just information program, whole books are devoted to the topic. For the sake of getting started, I offer a simple concept that might help us, borrowed from the contemporary philosopher Paul Gomberg: **contributive justice**.

Put simply, contributive justice is the idea that a thing (in our case a program) is just if all people involved have a duty and equal opportunity to contribute their labor to it, and a duty and equal opportunity to participate in decision making about it (Gomberg, 2007).

It's based on the idea that our respect and esteem for one another is an unlimited resource that stems from our acknowledgement of each other's contributions. We can and should create equal opportunities for each other to contribute and therefore be respected for our contributions.

For our purposes, this means that we need to lose any notion of librarians as authoritative arbiters of information. The knowledge creation that we—librarians, library workers and patrons—engage in together should be directed by all those involved and carried out by all those involved.

This can only be achieved through true participation, not "opportunities for patron feedback", not "community consultation", not tokenism, nor any effort that falls short of fully respecting the agency of all involved.

It's hard to imagine this kind of participation in many aspects of our lives. Admittedly, it's even hard to imagine this participation in the whole of the library, where ultimate decision-making power lies with supervisors and The Board. You're not going to wrest that power (yet). Start with what you can control: one program. If you don't have money, lay that out on the table for all to know, figure out what and how you can create together without it. Give it a try.

More to ponder

When's the last time you shared knowledge with someone in your life? How did they react? How did it feel?
Practice doing it more often.

How might you invite someone to share something they know, or something they want to know, if you don't yet know what it is?
Come up with some opening lines.
Test them out on your friends.

Think about a program that already exists at your library. Who decided what the program would be? How might that decision be opened up to the program's participants?
List some possible ways. Bring them up at the next program.

means and methods

What if I told you that libraries already have the most important resource they need to begin facilitating local knowledge creation? It's not money, they don't have that. It's librarians. I know that might sound a little contradictory after I called for us to lose our notions of librarians as information authorities but hear me out.

Though they might not think of themselves this way, librarians are educators—or at least have the potential to be. To become a librarian, they had (the privilege) to go to grad school, where they studied *information literacy*. They learned to engage with information—to read it, interpret it, contextualize it, and question who it benefits and harms. They've come to understand that just because something is published doesn't mean it's true, and that the positionality of a source can be just as informative as its content.

It's this information literacy that librarians have to offer as educators. This is the means by which we can build the participatory local knowledge environment we want to see.

Public librarians are ideally positioned to help others who haven't had the privilege of graduate study, or maybe any formal education, to go through the process of reading, interpreting, contextualizing, and questioning information.

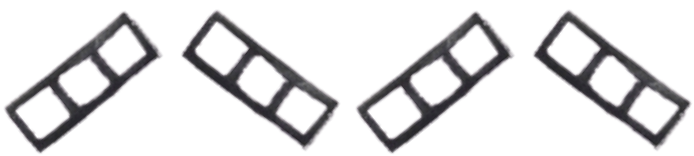
By engaging in this process together, librarians, library workers, and patrons can map the relationships between information and power, notice whose voices are missing from the dominant story, and talk back: to the library, to systems, to the world.

Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, who emphasized the importance of action and reflection in education, library student Rachel Hall has imagined what it would look like for public librarians to meet their potential as information literacy educators. In her essay “Public Praxis”, she writes:

> *“[Public libraries must] become partners with the members of their communities, pose problems, and act upon the world in order to change it. Problem-posing public libraries will actively seek out issues of concern within the community and create spaces for these conversations to happen. They will address controversial topics and ask challenging questions.”*

The methods of problem-posing public libraries are simple yet powerful:

- They invite their community members to come as they are, on their own terms
- They encourage them to bring issues of community concern into the library
- They create forums where these concerns can be discussed
- They facilitate the community’s use of library tools and resources to act on these concerns



Let's think through an example

Picture yourself in the problem-posing library we've been imagining. How might you respond to this question:

> *"I've heard that lots of people got displaced from their homes in the lead up to the 1984 LA Olympics. How can I find out if the same thing is happening now with the upcoming Olympics?"*

Here are some potential follow-ups that occur to me:

- What do we, in this conversation, already know about the situation?
- Who do we know that might know more?
- What books or historical resources in the library might give us helpful context?
- What news outlets might be covering this issue? What might be their biases?
- What organizations in our community might be working on this issue?
- Let's make a basic power map:
  - Who's likely to benefit from the Olympics in LA?
  - Who's likely to be harmed?
- Who else might want to learn about this with us?
  - Let's invite them to the library to discuss.

What else might you ask?

inspirations

Discussing community concerns is one thing. Coming up with ideas for programs that could address them is another. Doing those programs, another still. Here are two real life program examples that might help you walk the path from conversation to action.

The People's Library began in 2013 at the Main Branch of the Richmond Public Library in Virginia. It's since been replicated elsewhere—including in San Leandro, California, where I first encountered a People's Library collection.

The idea is simple: Libraries designed, built, and authored by community members.

Over multiple program sessions, patrons come together to turn old books weeded from the collection into new blank books—learning how to make paper and bind books in the process. They then fill these books with personal and local histories in response to collectively agreed upon prompts. More blank books are distributed to other members of the community who might like to contribute. Completed books are cataloged by the library according to each author's wishes and together become a usable collection. The process is just as important as the final product.

My words can't do it justice. You can read about it from the People's Librarians themselves in the People's Library How To Guide and at the People's Library website.

Documenters is a community-driven civic information network founded in 2018. It's not a library project, but it could be.

The organization grew out of a mutual concern of local journalists and members of the public in Chicago: citizens' lives are being affected by decisions made at local government meetings, but it's hard for everyday people to keep track of these meetings, get involved, and hold their leaders accountable. What's more, the local newsrooms that used to cover these meetings have been hollowed out by declining ad revenues and corporate consolidation.

The solution? A network of citizen groups in cities across the country which anyone can join to be trained by journalists on how to observe and report on public meetings, then get paid to go to meetings, take notes, and share their findings back with the community.

You can learn more about it at the Documenters website and in the Documenters Field Guide.

Can't you imagine a local Documenters group meeting regularly in your library?

Can't you imagine people seeing them meet and wanting to get involved?

Can't you imagine civic action bubbling forth?

now what?

This guide is nothing more than a starting point.
I hope it leaves you with more questions than answers.
I hope you keep thinking about them.
Ask them to your friends and coworkers.
Ask them out loud in the library.
Then do something about it.

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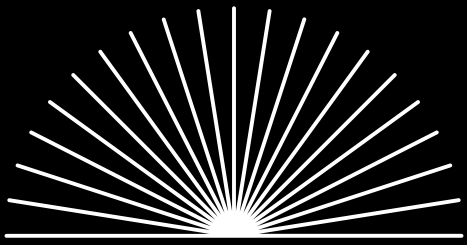

“A single moon shines in every drop of water
every water-drop moon the very same moon”

— Yongjia’s Song of Enlightenment
translated by Red Pine